

The Development of Public Relations and Integrated Marketing Communications at the General Post Office, 1933-39.

A Study in the Emergence of 'Admass' in the United Kingdom

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In the interwar period the British Post Office, or the General Post Office (GPO), was the largest organisation and employer in Britain. In the 1930s the GPO employed over 250,000 workers. The organisation was in fact several businesses. Its primary activities revolved around communication, principally postal services, telegraphs and telephone. In relation to the former the interwar period, and particularly the 1930s, witnessed a massive growth in international postal services via airmail. In addition, the GPO operated a major bank, the Post Office Savings Bank, and oversaw the broadcasting license for the British Broadcasting Corporation which it represented in Parliament. Finally the GPO was responsible for the payment of government benefits, including old age pensions. With the increase in social welfare from the liberal reforms of 1906-14 onwards, the GPO for many people in Britain became the embodiment and symbol of the state. It was the one government institution that most people regularly interacted with. It is no surprise, for example, that during the Easter Uprising in 1916 in Dublin, the Irish Republic forces occupied the British Post Office and used it as their headquarters. This occupation was as much symbolic as it was tactical or strategic.

The 1920s and 1930s witnessed a period of rapid change at the GPO. It motorised much of its transport and began to develop and promote both telephony and airmail. It was widely criticised, however, by business interests, politicians and newspapers for doing this too slowly, particularly in relation to telephones. In the 1920s the United States, Scandinavia and Germany had far higher telephone penetration rates than Britain. This was felt to be socially and economically disadvantageous to Britain and was seen to be a national disgrace. Much of the blame for this was put at the foot of the GPO which was accused of being overly conservative and bureaucratic. Its failure to adopt modern advertising and marketing practices was also seen to be a major cause of this. The GPO did not advertise and unlike other major contemporary British organisations in the railway, insurance, utility and oil sectors, did not indulge in public relations. It was only as a result of several official public enquiries in the 1920s and early 1930s, and of press campaigns engineered by industrial organisations and individual politicians that this changed. In 1933 a Public Relations Department was set up under the pioneering leadership of the senior civil servant Sir Stephen Tallents.

The Public Relations at the GPO was one of the first to be formally established in Britain and was responsible for some of the most innovative work in PR and marketing communications in the 1930s in Britain. Tallents himself would go on to set up the PR department at the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1935 and play a leading role in the establishment of the British Chartered Institute of Public Relations in 1948. It can be argued that the work that was carried out at the GPO in the 1930s, much of which was pioneering and experimental, laid a major foundation for the growth of public relations and corporate communications in Great Britain. An industry, one must add, which is the now the second largest in the world next to the United States. It was at the GPO for example, that a clear distinction was made between product advertising and prestige advertising, the latter referring to corporate communication and organisation promotion, what today we might term corporate branding. The GPO carried out market research, identified target markets, delineated, interacted and communicated with key stakeholders, planned communication campaigns and developed a highly innovative system of corporate communications, publicity, advertising and marketing for a growing range of products and services.

The GPO, under Tallents and his successor E. T. Crutchley were also highly innovative in the goals they established. On the one hand advertising, publicity and public relations acted at the GPO in exactly the same way it did at other commercial organisations. It was furnished to promote products, build up brand awareness and knowledge, create needs (particularly for new products such as the telephone or greeting telegraphs), and maintain customer loyalty. Yet on the other hand, as a major public institution, PR and publicity at the GPO aimed to fulfil several distinct roles. As an organisation which sold a public good – communication – the post office was accountable to the general public. The growth of full democracy in Britain in 1918 and 1928 acted as a catalyst to this public duty. The GPO used PR and publicity to provide information about its services to the public. It used it to explain and demonstrate how the organisation functioned, its operations, processes and organisational machinery. In this respect it had an educational and informational role. PR was also used to create links with important publics and stakeholders, such as chambers of commerce, politicians, education authorities, the press, the BBC and local communities. It was also used to induce co-operation from the public, acting as a behavioural change agent. The efforts of the GPO to encourage people to post early so as to rationalise the receipt, distribution and delivery of mail over the day is a case in point here. Finally according to Tallents, the GPO had a much grander role of representing the nation to itself, of providing it with a sense of identity, purpose and meaning. As a major governmental institution, the GPO was responsible for the very manufacture and engineering of Britishness itself. As Tallents himself wrote, 'We need to build up, piece by piece, a picture of our own people, and also for others, of what this country has done, is doing and seeks to do in its endeavour to equip itself ... to meet a wholly new range of modern conditions'. [1] Advertising, mail shots, promotions, lectures, leaflets, magazines, publications, editorial, exhibitions, posters, art, sales teams, films and events were all used to realise these commercial and public goals.

Whilst publicity at the GPO has received a great deal of attention, academic discussion has focused on the aesthetic and cultural merits of its communication rather than its proclivity to marketing, commercial or organisational goals (Anthony and Mansell, 2011). While not denying the artistic and social achievement of the post office's publicity and communication, it must not be forgotten that these were means rather than ends. Commercial success and organisational reputation and legitimacy were always the main driving forces behind the publicity of the GPO in the interwar period. In emphasising this, one is reminded of Fine and Leopold's dictum that, 'advertising is itself concerned with the creation of a product ... and sold to make a profit' (Church, 2000). It is the purpose this paper to adopt this latter perspective. Based on material from The Royal Mail Archive, its main aims, as summarised in this abstract, will be to explain the reasons behind the rise of public relations at the GPO in the 1930s, to outline how the GPO utilised PR and publicity and to discuss the commercial and organisational goals of this communication. It will also discuss how the GPO was highly innovative not only in the tools and mediums of its communication, but also in the way it integrated them to realise marketing and organisational goals. It will argue that an examination of the PR, publicity and marketing at the GPO during this period provides historians with one of the first examples of the practice of integrated marketing communication in the United Kingdom. Finally it also aims to briefly compare communication at the GPO with other contemporary organisations in Britain such as the Prudential Life Assurance Company, the Southern Railway Company, Shell Transport and Trading, the London Underground and the BBC. It will argue that whilst there is much that was new in the GPO's communicative practice, most of its publicity, and in particular its PR, was reflective of these organisations and represented a major turning point, both in marketing and corporate communications, in the manner in which major British organisations communicated, promoted their products and presented themselves to publics and the nation at large.

Notes

[1] Sir Stephen Tallents, 'Post Office Publicity', The Post Office Green Papers Number 8, 1935, The Royal Mail Archive, London.

References

- Anthony, S. and Mansell, J.G. (Eds.) (2011), *The Projection of Britain: A History of the GPO Film Unit*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Church, R. (2000), "Advertising consumer goods in nineteenth century Britain: reinterpretations," *Economic History Review*, Vol. 53 No. 4, pp. 621-645.